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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [EG](#)
SUBJECT: MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD: GOVERNMENT CRACKDOWN
CONTINUES, PARTY PLATFORM STILL IN DRAFT

REF: A. 2006 CAIRO 7171

- [1](#)B. CAIRO 144
- [1](#)C. CAIRO 409
- [1](#)D. CAIRO 1128
- [1](#)E. CAIRO 1276
- [1](#)F. CAIRO 1641

Classified By: Minister-Counselor for Economic and Political Affairs
William R. Stewart, for reason 1.4 (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Egyptian government's campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is continuing, with the recent arrests of a prominent moderate official, two MB parliamentarians, and other senior officials, upping the ante. The latest detentions occur against the backdrop of the ongoing military trials of 40 MB members, and the MB's continued development of a political party platform, which the organization expects to formally release in September. Regardless of the specific reasons behind the ongoing campaign against the MB, it appears to be having the unintended consequence of increasing public sympathy for the Islamist organization. Notably, in the face of this intense governmental pressure, the MB has maintained a moderate public stance, continuing to work on developing its party platform, and advocating non-violence and compliance with Egyptian law. End summary.

UNRELENTING CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE MB

[1](#)2. (U) The GOE's months-long campaign of arrests against the MB shows no sign of letting up, with an estimated 53 MB members detained in the past four weeks alone. (Note: According to public statements made by Mohamed Habib, the MB's Deputy Supreme Guide, there are currently 600 MB members in detention. End note). Notable among the arrests is the August 17 detention of prominent MB leader and reputed torchbearer of the organization's moderate wing, Essam El Erian, who was arrested at a private home, together with Mahmoud Hussein (an aged MB Guidance Council member allegedly in poor health) and 15 other "leading members." Erian and his cohort, detained under the auspices of Egypt's Emergency Law, are reportedly accused of belonging to a banned organization, possession of illegal documents, and plotting to overthrow the government. Government newspapers have quoted sources in State Security and the Public Prosecutor's office as saying that the arrestees were meeting to plan for internal MB elections. MB Deputy Supreme Guide Mohamed Habib denied this in several media interviews, stating, "we well understand how (badly) the regime would view a meeting of the Majlis Al Shura Al Gamaa (for internal elections), and we would not even think of taking that step."

[1](#)3. (U) On August 22, the security services briefly detained

two MB parliamentarians, Ragab Abu Zeid and Sabri Amer. The pair had been briefly arrested in April, after which their parliamentary immunity was lifted, and they were subsequently released (ref E). On August 23, Abu Zeid and Amer were released on bail of 10,000 LE (approximately 1,750 USD) each. It is unclear when, or if, their trial will commence. The MB's parliamentary bloc denounced the "illegal detention," in a formal statement issued by bloc leader Saad Al Katatni, viewing it as "part of the ongoing security escalation of the regime against the MB ... The message is to humiliate MP's and ... settle scores with the opposition." Other recent arrestees reportedly include the key staffers of several MB parliamentarians.

¶4. (U) The latest arrests occur against the backdrop of the ongoing military trials of 40 MB members, including Khairat Al Shatir, the third-most senior official in the MB (refs C and D). Family members, several members of the defense team, journalists, and representatives of human rights organizations have reportedly not been allowed into the courtroom where the tribunal is being held. Shatir's daughter told journalists that her father's health is deteriorating in prison, and that he is suffering from high blood pressure, diabetes, and "tumors" in his feet. She alleged that Shatir's doctor was denied access to the military prison.

U.S. APPROVES OF THE ARRESTS?

¶5. (C) In an August 22 interview with Al Jazeera, MB Supreme Guide Mehdi Akef insinuated that lack of USG pressure on the Egyptian regime is partly to blame for the continued

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detentions of MB members. Akef asserted that U.S. pressure had at one time improved political freedom for Egyptian opposition groups, and that, "we enjoyed that freedom when there were American pressures on the Egyptian government. Even the government's term of describing us a banned group disappeared. The semi-official Al Ahram newspaper interviewed me. I couldn't believe that I would feature on the first page of this government newspaper. But, after (the MB won) 88 seats in parliament, the bone crushing started." Deputy Supreme Guide Habib has also publicly implied that the USG is somehow complicit or tacitly approving of the detentions. Several of our civil society contacts have pointedly asked why the USG publicly criticizes the detention of imprisoned Al Ghad party leader Ayman Nour, or that of imprisoned blogger Abdel Karim Soliman, but has been silent regarding the arrests of hundreds of MB members and the ongoing military tribunals.

PARTY PLATFORM NOT DONE YET,
BUT COMING SOON

¶6. (U) Amidst the arrests and military tribunals, the MB reportedly continues to slowly move forward with plans to develop a political party platform (refs B and D). The independent newspaper Al Masry Al Yom recently published a detailed text alleged to be the platform itself. However, several MB officials, including Supreme Guide Akef, have stated that the text was a preliminary draft of the platform, and not the final product. In an August 21 interview with new independent newspaper Al Badeel, Deputy Supreme Guide Habib stated that the platform will be completed and released "in September," after the Guidance Council has completed its review and then "sent it to a set of intellectuals for final feedback." In an August 26 interview in the Nasserite newspaper Al Arabi, Akef is quoted as saying "We sent the draft to our offices, so that they can comment, which they already did. Now that we have received comments and suggestions on the draft, we will refer the program back to

the Guidance Office to give their views on the gray areas that are yet to be settled. (Those gray areas) pertain to the ruling system, transition of power, and the presidential term of office. We also need to further clarify our position on women and Copts, as well as our stance regarding tourism."

¶7. (U) In recent public discussions regarding the platform, Akef, Habib, and Guidance Council member Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh have been careful to note that the MB has no plans to apply formally to the ruling party-dominated Political Parties Committee (PPC) to register as a party. In his interview with Al Badeel, Habib described the MB's plans thusly: "The MB will neither apply to the PPC nor declare the party unilaterally. This is not ambivalence, but political compromise, because there is a law - which I consider unjust, oppressive and unconstitutional - but nevertheless, I must abide by the law. So, we will wait until the political atmosphere changes." Akef told his Al Arabi interviewer, "We know that the government will not approve the party. Thus, the program is more like a plan of cooperation and accord with the political elite, the other national powers, and expert in the political scene With such a regime, demonstrations will not change a thing. What changes it is cohesion between all popular powers and accord in one position."

WHY IS THE GOVERNMENT TURNING
UP THE HEAT NOW?

¶8. (C) The initial impetus for the current campaign against the MB was the mid-December MB student demonstration at Al Azhar University (ref A). However, although the government has long since detained those associated with that incident, the detentions of MB members continue at an accelerated pace, and the recent arrests of Erian, Hussein, the two MB MP's, and other fairly senior officials have upped the ante in terms of the government continuing to target senior members of the organization. Egyptian analysts, our contacts, and the MB itself speculates a range of motivations are behind the ongoing repression:

- The MB is still reaping the fallout from its success in the 2005 parliamentary elections, when it won an unprecedented 88 seats in the People's Assembly. The government, worried by the MB's apparent strength and popular appeal, is working to contain and weaken the group by imprisoning key leaders and

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members. Deputy Supreme Guide Habib, in an August 15 Al Jazeera interview, said, "The reason (for recent arrests and tensions with the government) is the 2005 parliamentary elections."

- The GOE is likely concerned by the MB's halting steps towards recasting itself as a legitimate, relatively moderate political actor, as it develops what is, by preliminary accounts, a non-extremist platform. Ibrahim Al Houdaiby, an emerging young MB leader whose grandfather served as the organization's Supreme Guide, recently commented to journalists, "The arrest of Erian is a clear attempt by the regime to crackdown on the moderate leaders of the MB who could push the group towards more moderate stances. The questions remains: Who does that serve?" A think tank contact of ours believes that the recent arrests "are a pre-emptive strike aimed at preventing the MB from further disseminating its political platform, and tantamount to a message to the MB to desist from political activism," highlighting that the "the regime is worried that the MB party program could steal the limelight from the NDP and the reform program it plans to present at its November party conference."

- Another factor likely raising GOE hackles is the recent

uptick in foreign legislative outreach to the MB. As reported ref F, the GOE reacted testily to the recent contact between U.S. congressmen and an MB legislator. In a report published in mid-August, the Foreign Relations Committee of the UK House of Commons recommended that "British diplomats should talk to moderate elements," within the MB and other regional Islamist groups. Head of the MB's parliamentary bloc Katatni has asserted publicly that there is a link between the recent arrests and the increased international interest in "dialogue" with the MB: "The government wishes to send a message to other governments that it will not cave into foreign pressure and will never condone the activities of the Brotherhood."

- In the lead-up to the spring 2008 local council elections, the GOE is likely aiming to damage the MB's organizational infrastructure, so as to better prepare the political landscape for the potentially challenging electoral contests, and keep the MB from winning any further electoral victories, which are an embarrassment for the GOE. Local analysts speculate that the small districts of the local council elections may play to the MB's strengths of local name-recognition for candidates, unlike the Shura Council races (which comprised large unwieldy districts).

- The goal of a smooth succession may be fueling some of the recent moves against the MB, with the GOE, and particularly supporters of Gamal Mubarak's presidential aspirations, calculating that it is easier to hit hard against the MB now, rather than later. Some local analysts have told us that the MB would surely be among the loudest critics of a Gamal succession, and so it behooves the government to encourage organizational disarray now.

COMMENT

19. (C) Whatever the reasons behind the ongoing campaign against the MB, it appears to be having the unintended consequence of increasing public sympathy for the Islamist organization. We have heard numerous anecdotal reports from our contacts that many Egyptians feel the government is treating the MB too harshly, with the military tribunals in particular being perceived as "unjust." On August 5, the Al Wafd newspaper published an unusual public statement, signed by numerous liberal political activists and intellectuals, critical of the military trials. Some liberal-minded, normally anti-MB Egyptian journalists and intellectuals have also published op-ed pieces disparaging the tribunals. Notably, in the face of intense pressure from the regime, the MB has maintained a moderate public stance, continuing to work on developing its party platform, and advocating non-violence and compliance with Egyptian law.
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